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Aug 20 1899

AN ADDRESS

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“THE NAVY IN RELATION TO THE EMPIRE,”

DELIVERED BY

SIR JOHN COLOMB, K.C.M.G., M.P.,

AT THE

Junior Constitutional Club,

PICCADILLY,

ON

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16th, 1899.

MR. H. O. ARNOLD-FORSTER, M.P.,
IN THE CHAIR.

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“THE ARMOURY,” SOUTHWARK, S.E.

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March 29th 1899.

Dear Sir,

Sir John Colomb desires
me to send you the enclosed
report of an address delivered
by him at the Junior
Constitutional Club, as he
is of opinion you may
possibly wish to comment
upon it.

In the event of
your doing so — he

presumes adversely — he
would be obliged by your
kindly sending him two
copies of the paper.

He is anxious that
the question should be
fully discussed.

I am

Yours faithfully

H. D'Egville

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The Globe
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On Thursday Evening, February 16th, 1899, an Address, entitled "THE NAVY IN RELATION TO THE EMPIRE," delivered at the Junior Constitutional Club, Piccadilly, by Sir JOHN COLOMB, K.C.M.G., M.P. Mr. H. O. Arnold - Forster, M.P., in the Chair.

THE CHAIRMAN, who was received with applause on rising to introduce the lecturer, observed that on two previous occasions he had been allowed to accept the hospitality of the Club, and on the third he found himself in the position of being asked to take part in their proceedings as Chairman. His duty, under the circumstances, was a very easy one, and his Address would for many reasons be a short one. In the first place, an entirely new subject—Home Rule (laughter)—was being discussed that evening in the House of Commons, in regard to which he entertained considerable prejudice, and he was particularly anxious to take part in the division. His other reason was that he did not desire to keep them, for any length of time, from listening to the remarks of Sir John Colomb, who was exceedingly well known to them all. (Hear, hear.) He ventured to assert that there was no one in this country who was more competent than he to speak on the question of the Navy, and he knew of nobody who could possibly be placed in competition with him on the subject who would be likely to take so broad, comprehensive, and instructive a view of the many large questions connected with the Navy (Hear, hear). He said that, fully bearing in mind the great services which had been rendered by Sir John Colomb's distinguished brother, but looking back as far as he was able over the literature on this subject, he believed there

was no one who for a longer period had taken a wider interest in this question than his hon. and gallant colleague. He spoke as a very humble pupil of his who had sat at his feet, so to speak, in the matter of naval policy for a very long time, and his feeling was that they would do well to follow his example in this particular, that they would read with very great care and very great respect everything which Sir John Colomb wrote, and that they would listen with rapt attention to his remarks that evening. For his study of the question, about which he would speak, was not based upon any one separate consideration, and although he had written much, and well on the side issues of naval strategy and navy policy, he nevertheless kept clearly in view a certain definite line in regard to the relations between the navy and the existence of our country, which was absolutely essential in his (the Chairman's) opinion, to a proper comprehension of the duties of the Navy, and the terms upon which our country, as a country, could exist. (Applause.)

SIR JOHN COLOMB, who was cordially received, said the too flattering remarks of Mr. Arnold-Foster would, in all probability, prepare them for a disappointment, but he could only say that if ever he had had the honour of having his hon. colleague as a pupil, the pupil had now almost been converted into the master! He had been invited to deliver an Address for the purpose of raising a discussion on the subject of the Navy, and naturally he had to consider what portion of that vast subject would be most useful for him to take up; and in the first place he desired to say, although he did not intend to refer to it again, that in speaking of the Navy in relation to the Empire, he trusted they would be good enough to bear in mind that the subject of his Address could not be treated entirely as a distinct and separate question, involving

as it did both the Army as well as the Navy. Therefore, if he did not again allude to the Army, it was owing to the fact that the subject upon which he was invited to deliver an Address was the Navy, but whilst he wished to guard against being misunderstood by saying that the Navy was the primary force, the defence of the Empire was absolutely incomplete if they left out of account the military element. Another point, as he had already stated, which he had to consider was what would be the most useful line for him to take up in addressing a political club, many of the younger members of which were likely in the future to have charge of the destinies of this country, and the conclusion at which he arrived was that he would be best advised in dealing with the subject, not from a strategical or purely technical point of view, but upon the broad grounds which determined the naval policy of this country. And in order to bring this clearly before them he proposed at the outset to refer to two paragraphs which appeared in the recent Speech from the Throne. One had reference to the Conference to which the various Powers had been invited by Russia for the purpose of considering the possibility of limiting the vast armaments, and in which Great Britain had promised to take part. The other paragraph to which he would allude was that expressing satisfaction that the Cape Parliament—(Hear, hear)—had recognised the principle of a common responsibility for the naval defence of the Empire by providing a permanent annual contribution towards that object. Both these questions had reference to current politics, and with their approval he proposed very briefly to offer a few observations—not to venture upon any dogmatic opinion—thereon which might lead to further research and investigation. Dealing in the first place, therefore, with the International Conference it was necessary

- for them to consider the relative conditions of the various countries which would be represented at that gathering. The broad fact which they had to remember was that the
- (1) internal communications of the British Empire were sea communications, and that those communications were over
 - (2) the highway of the world. That was the broad geographical distinction which existed between their own representatives at the Conference and those of every other country. The next point which they had to consider was the economical
 - (3) conditions of their empire, and taking merely the elements of population, the corn-growing areas, and the distribution of mineral wealth, let them compare them with those of other powers who would be represented at the Conference. The one remarkable fact in that connection was that the huge proportion of all those elements were over-sea in the case of the British Isles. So far as those three things were considered, as potentialities which in material matters made in
- great states, they lay outside, and not inside, the parent country, a position the exact reverse of which obtained in all the other countries concerned. That being the case it was necessary that their policy should be framed with due regard to the distribution of those great factors in material wealth. Let them consider the case of Russia where, as he had said, the conditions were exactly reversed. That great nation had no over-sea possessions, and her sea-borne commerce was many many millions short of that of Australasia alone. That, he thought, was a sufficient illustration of the enormous difference between the sea interests of Russia and those of the United Kingdom. Now let them take the case of France, and he selected that country because, next to themselves, she had the greatest colonial possessions in the world. Taking the simple geographical fact of area, and comparing the two countries,

they would find that whereas Great Britain had ninety square miles of territory over sea to one at home, France's possessions only stood in the ratio of twelve to one. On the question of population, too, they would find, according to statistics which were available to all of them, that there were ten of Her Majesty's subjects over sea to every one at home, whilst in the case of France numbers were practically equal, being in the ratio of one at home to every 1.09 over sea. Turning to the exports and imports of the British Isles as compared with those of British possessions beyond the seas they found that they were in the proportion of eight to five, whereas in the case of France it was twenty at home to one abroad. He would now deal with some of the other factors in the situation. No other country had self-governing provinces over the sea, and he need not remind them that the cohesion and unity of their empire depended absolutely and completely upon the security and freedom which was obtainable for their communications over the sea, which was the highway of the world. Therefore there was no parallel whatever between the interests of Great Britain at the Conference in question and those of any other nation which would be represented, and under the circumstances he submitted that it was inconceivable that they should be able to enter into any discussion upon the limitation of naval armaments. (Hear, hear.) With regard also to the question of internal communications, in Russia it was established by means of rails and roads upon Russian soil, whereas, those of Great Britain, as he had already pointed out, lay on the highway of the world. It would be ridiculously absurd for them to propose to limit the means of Russia in the maintenance of the internal communications of her empire, and it was equally absurd to suppose that they

could listen for one moment to any European Conference proposing to limit their control over what was necessary for the maintenance of their own communications. He might possibly be met with the argument that the railways and roads in Russia were upon Russian soil, whilst theirs were on the waterways of the world, but his answer to that was that they were Russian only so long as Russia was able to keep them, just as in their own case they would keep the sea, and thus preserve the unity of their empire, until some stronger power could take them from them. The next point was that all these things made it clear that, however desirous and anxious they might be—and all sensible men must be—to see peace preserved, they ought to be extremely cautious as to what they said or did in the matter of the Conference, seeing that they were not free agents and were controlled by forces and facts altogether beyond their power. There were a few fanatics who imagined that they would get rid of their naval burden by getting rid of the empire. Their number was becoming smaller every day, due, he believed, in great measure, to the educational influences of the Unionist party, the strength of which, in his opinion, lay not in the mere dogmatic assertion that their party was right, but that it was right because it was founded upon a common-sense and business-like appreciation of facts. Now the actual fact that they had to face was this, that the navy was a burden which was likely to increase rather than diminish in the future, and he would have them realize that there was no royal road to rid themselves of that burden. It might be argued that any proposals for disarmament or for the limitations of armaments that might be made at the forthcoming Conference would be relative, and that therefore if all were asked to make the reduction in the same proportion they would be perfectly safe. That, however,

was a fallacy, and for this reason, that it was fixing their present standard as final and unalterable. It was a very useful standard to maintain, from a political point of view, that their fleet should be equal to those of any two other powers, but he did not think much of the argument that they must accept that as final. His own view of the matter was that the two to one argument might be correct in some cases, but not always, and it was decidedly unsafe therefore to risk their Empire upon that standard for all time. Then they were confronted with the cry of "War against War," but that seemed to him only a wild attempt to stir up a condition of hysterical excitement in order to persuade the English people that war was really at hand! But the greatest trading community in the world did not require a political or, indeed, any other agitation in the pursuit of peace, because it was so utterly obvious that the greatest interests which a commercial community like theirs could desire were those of peace. He submitted that the greatest security of the World's maritime peace must be that the keys of the sea were in the hands of that nation and that empire which was most interested in the preservation of peace. To the Conference which was in search of peace, he would point out that the best way to secure maritime peace was to recognize the fact that that was so, and that the mastery of the sea in British hands was the greatest possible guarantee of that peace being preserved. They must not, however, look at things from a merely theoretical point of view but from actual experience. Since the battle of Trafalgar they had enjoyed ninety-four years of general maritime peace. It had certainly been broken, but, taking any similar period before that date, they would find that there had been anything but maritime peace. In fact, it was one continual strife on the sea, due to

the fact that it was open to contest, and that the supremacy was, as it were, in competition and open to the claims of many and various nations. The long series of efforts which had been made for the command of the sea closed with Trafalgar, and when the sun set on that immortal 21st of October, 1805, Great Britain remained undisputed master. There was no greater mistake, however, than to suppose that it was to that victory that they owed the ninety-four years of peace that followed. That was due to the fact that the statesmen of England recognized the terrific uncertainty of the maritime world, for within six weeks of Nelson being laid in the grave a supplemental vote for two millions for the Navy was brought forward in the House of Commons. He submitted that the Naval supremacy of this country was maintained, not by the *prestige* of the battle of Trafalgar, but by the policy pursued by statesmen which resulted in their naval armaments at the period of Waterloo, only ten years later, being double what they were at Trafalgar. Then they came down to the Crimean War, when all Europe was exhausted, and when their ports were crowded with reserve ships. Everyone knew they had command of the sea, and they had peace! But let them take the cases of the American War in 1812-13, the war between China and Japan, and other great struggles where there had been grave international peril in consequence of the disturbance of the peace of the sea. They would find that it was only in 1859, when they were living upon their reserve power, that the Navy began to decline. Without going into the causes which led to that state of things he might say that a great deal of it was due to the confusion which existed in the public mind in regard to the application of steam. At any rate there was a steady decline until the year 1870 when a dry rot set

in, and it was not until 1889, when, thanks to Lord Salisbury's Government, the first of the series of naval programmes was brought forward, that they began to re-establish their position, relatively speaking, to what it was before, and at the time of Waterloo. That policy had been pursued up to the present time, and no one could study the history of this question without being immensely struck by the manner in which Governments were hampered by public feeling, and how variable it was on the subject of its national defence. These hot and cold fits in regard to the Navy were periodical. He desired particularly to direct attention to that fact, because what had occurred before would occur again, and although just now public opinion was at a proper temperature in regard to naval interests, they knew from past experience that it was not likely to continue unless the members of such clubs as theirs used their influence and political power throughout the country in seeing that the people were educated in the bare facts, and compelled to understand that the question was one of life or death to the Empire. He warned them that the period of confidence which they were now enjoying could not last for ever, and that when bad times came, as come they must, the naval burden would be more severely felt. When that time arrived it would need all the argument which they could possibly put forward to keep the country straight on this matter. That brought out the great constitutional fact that the safety of their Empire depended upon the wave of popular opinion in one of its corners, for it was a fact that the feeling of the population of England entirely determined whether they should have a navy sufficient for their imperial needs or not. There were one or two matters of extreme importance in that connection. For instance, did they realise, when they very often talked glibly about Russia

versus the British Empire, that in the event of a war with that vast country it meant a struggle against the resources drawn from every corner of territory under her flag, whereas in their case it was a question of the resources only of a couple of islands. He could not too strongly urge this view of the case upon them, which was a question really of turning their dormant resources into an active power, and entreat them to remember the fact that they were acting on the principle that two islands in the North-east Atlantic could carry the great and growing burden of an enormous empire, with its ever-accumulating commerce in every quarter of the world, without drawing upon the resources of its outlying portions. With reference to the other paragraph in the Queen's Speech to which he had alluded, he humbly submitted that it had not received that national recognition which it deserved, seeing that one of their self-governing communities in the southern hemisphere had recognised the absurdity, the anomaly, and the ridiculousness of supposing that these two islands could possibly bear the whole burden of the maritime defence of the Empire. Under the circumstances it had voluntarily placed at the disposal of the British Admiralty a sum of £30,000 a year as a permanent contribution in recognition of that principle. Of course, in itself the amount was insignificant, representing as it did not more than two and a half first-class guns or a few torpedoes, but the gift must be measured by the fact that they were in an anomalous and ridiculous position as an Empire, and that the Cape Government had recognised that fact. He trusted that members of that Club who spoke and had so much influence in all parts of the country would take care to bring this fact forward as a first step towards the creation of a new state of things, upon which he honestly and sincerely believed depended the existence of their Empire in the future. Wherever they had

the opportunity he trusted they would hold up the Cape as an example to other colonies who were equally well able to come forward with a similar proposition. (Hear, hear.) He believed that, as the continued existence of their Empire was primarily a political question, the defence of that Empire and the combination of her resources into one great whole for the defence of her common interests was the greatest of all political problems which statesmen had to face at the present moment. The two main factors in considering that question were (1) upon what basis the relative responsibility of providing for the maritime security of all parts of the Empire should be borne, and (2) under what system could those resources be combined and applied so as to secure unity of control and representation in the administration in proportion to the taxation involved. There might, of course, be many ways of dealing with these two main points, but the whole question, he could assure them, was not one of ability or of means to provide for imperial necessities, but simply one of machinery and organisation. In an extremely interesting paper which he read only last Tuesday at the Colonial Institute, Sir Robert Giffen, the well known statistician, put down the total revenue of the outlying portions of the British Empire at 150 millions per annum. The annual aggregate revenue to-day of their over-sea Empire was no less than 150 millions; that, of course, was altogether apart from the revenue of the United Kingdom. Comparing this with other countries, what did they find? The annual revenue of France was only 138 millions, Russia 141 millions, Germany 65 millions, Italy 70 millions, the United States 89 millions, and Japan 16 millions—in other words that of our over-sea possessions alone was 12 millions per annum more than France, 9 millions more than Russia, 85 millions more than Germany,

80 millions more than Italy, 61 millions more than the United States, and 134 millions more than Japan, whose alliance some people were seeking. That was, he thought, sufficient evidence in regard to the question of ability, because they must remember that it was not so much a matter of finding men for the Navy as money for the material. And, therefore, he did not think he need weary them by giving any more figures in corroboration of the statement which he submitted that the question of their ability to stand alone—in “Splendid isolation,” if they liked to call it—and to maintain the supremacy of the sea was not one of money or ability, but of organisation and political machinery. In conclusion, they had heard a good deal lately on the question of alliances, and no doubt recent events in China had caused popular feeling rather to set in that direction. The alliance that was mentioned was one between Great Britain, Germany, the United States, and Japan. Personally, he agreed with Mr. Goschen’s “splendid isolation,” but he considered the “splendid isolation” of two islands, with the responsibility of the entire Empire upon them, was very different from the “splendid isolation” of an Empire relying upon her own resources drawn from all corners of the earth. Therefore, before they left the question of alliances altogether, they should look a little more closely at their own means of maintaining their own position, unaided, if necessary, in the world. The recent excitement about Russia had arisen, to a great extent, over Port Arthur, but did they reflect that the sea-borne commerce of that vast Empire was by many millions less than that of Australasia alone, and yet Russia spent enormous sums annually on her fleet, whilst Australia contributed about £180,000 per annum towards the maintenance of the ships on the Australian station. Then in regard to Japan. With an

annual revenue of sixteen millions, she was spending five millions on the Navy, and those people who desired to secure the assistance of Japan would do well to remember that in their own Empire there was a revenue of 150 millions not charged at all. And taking these three powers together, the total revenue was only twenty millions a year more than the total revenue of their own over-sea Empire. The percentage of naval expenses to revenue of the various powers of Europe was extremely interesting and instructive, and showed that whilst the United Kingdom appropriated $22\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. of the revenue to the fleet for the maintenance of the Empire, the over-sea Empire was 3; in France, 7.2; Russia, 4.2; Germany, 9.2; Italy, 5; the United States, 7.7; and Japan, 52.9 per cent. These were figures and facts which were altogether indisputable, and he entreated them to use their influence in investigating this question, remembering that upon the power of their fleet depended the very existence of their Empire, and in view of the enormous growth of these outlying portions, and the development of their trade and commerce, they should lose no time in facing the question as to how to combine the whole resources of their Empire to defend that which was the common interest of them all—the defence of the seas and oceans of the world. (Loud applause.)

A short discussion followed, and the proceedings terminated with the customary votes of thanks to Sir John Colomb for his Address, and to the Chairman for presiding.